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## Beyond the Demonstrations: The Socioeconomic and Political Roots of Indonesia's Protests

*Sum Pichkanika*



On 25 August, thousands of [demonstrators gathered outside Parliament](#) to protest in the streets of Jakarta. Protesters were chanting against budget cuts as well as corrupt elites within the government. The cuts have led to many problems including increasing taxes on local land and property, unfair economic distribution, and jeopardizing essential public sectors such as healthcare, education, and irrigation infrastructure. The violence escalated after news broke that politicians were granted a [US\\$3,000 housing allowance](#) on top of their regular salaries. Following by the death of a 21-year-old delivery driver, the protesters were fueled to be more aggressive, making the demonstrations spread to many provinces in Indonesia such as Palembang on Sumatra island, Banjarmasin on Borneo island, Makassar on Sulawesi island, and

Yogyakarta on Java island. The clashes happened between riot police and rock-throwing protesters that started in the capital and quickly spread beyond Jakarta.

One of the reasons for the protest was the implementation of strict austerity measures. President Prabowo has enacted budget cuts in education, health, and public works, which forced thousands of students to stage "[Dark Indonesia](#)" protests in many cities such as Jakarta, Medan, and Yogyakarta. The budget cuts was only one aspect of the broader grievances expressed by the demonstrators. On 20 February 2025, thousands of demonstrators demanded changes regarding the budget cut, fearing it would threaten to increase the tuition fees and eliminate scholarships. The student leader stated that they were protesting against education budget reductions after President Prabowo initiated a cost-cutting campaign to free up about \$19 billion for his policies, including the plan for a free meal program.

Consequently, the cuts are viewed by the protestors as designed to plug a hole in expenses of the Nutritious Meals Program or Makan Bergizi Gratis (MBG), which was projected to cost \$28 billion annually. The program is set to serve children in schools across Indonesia's archipelago to address the problem of malnutrition and promote healthy eating. Since its launch on 6 January 2025, it has received strong endorsement from various United Nations agencies as a vital step toward achieving [the Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs), particularly SDG 2 on Zero Hunger and SDG 3 on Good Health and Well-being. This illustrates that the MBG program has the potential to significantly enhance children's health, learning capacity, and school participation. However, some local groups remain dissatisfied due to concerns over its high budget allocation, potential misuse of funds, unequal distribution of meals across regions, and the government's capacity to maintain consistent food quality and hygiene standards in remote areas.

Protestors also demanded [the revision of the Indonesia Armed Forces \(TNI\)](#) bill and the removal of military officials from civilian positions. Indonesia's parliament has ratified a law which allows the military to have a greater role in government, stating that the geopolitical changes and global military technology require military transformation to prepare for conventional and non-conventional conflicts. However, it is viewed by the protestors as "corrupt elites and reminiscent of the New Order era under Suharto". It has become a controversial topic, as it is seen as a potential return to the dual function of the military in civilian affairs, reminiscent of the New Order era under Suharto when military officers dominated civilian affairs. [Rights groups have criticized the move](#) and viewed it as the abuse of power, human rights violations, and political impunity for army personnel. Many feared that President Prabowo's political power would erode Indonesia democracy.

The clashes escalated after news broke that politicians were granted a [US\\$3,000 housing allowance](#) on top of their regular salaries. This amount is equivalent to 10 to 20 times the country's monthly minimum wage, sparking widespread outrage and protests throughout Java, Sumatra, Sulawesi, and Kalimantan. Public anger reached its peak after 21-year-old Affan Kurniawan's death, a motorcycle delivery driver who

was not participating in the protests but was simply delivering food, was tragically killed by a police vehicle during a demonstration in Jakarta. Due to this, thousands of delivery drivers came together and organized protests across the country. The National Police chief apologized and arrested seven officers for violating the police code of ethics. However, protests still escalated across the country.

Behind the public unrest lied a deep sense of economic frustration. [A January 2025 Indikator survey](#) involving 1,220 respondents from all provinces underscores this economic strain. It found that 53% of respondents reported no change in household income over the past year, 27% saw a decline, and only 19% experienced an increase. These figures reflect widening social inequality. Rising living costs, income stagnation and job insecurity were one of the reasons that fueled the public's dissatisfaction. On August 28, [labor unions and student groups](#) organized large protests in Jakarta and other cities, mostly concentrated around regional parliament buildings, demanding higher wages. The protest was peaceful until some people threw stones at the police and used bamboo sticks to try to break the police barricade. Then the paramilitary arm of the police was deployed to control the riot and to disperse the protesters.

These protests; however, cannot be understood as isolated reactions to a single policy. Rather, they reveal deeper socioeconomic frustrations that have accumulated over years. With the rising living costs, stagnant wages, and widening inequality have added fuel in which even a small policy would lead to major public backlash. Hence, the controversy over the housing allowances served more as a trigger than a root cause, highlighting the growing gap between political elites and ordinary citizens. Moreover, the demonstrations also reflect a crisis of public trust in Indonesia's political institutions and government intention regarding the revision of military law. For many Indonesians, the new law that gives the military a bigger role in government feels like a step backward. It reminds them of the New Order era, when the military held enormous power. This has raised real worries that democratic checks and civilian control could slowly weaken again. The protests therefore represent not merely economic discontent but a growing demand for accountability and political renewal.

Taken together, these political, economic, and social grievances illustrate that Indonesia's recent unrest is not driven by a single issue but by a broader crisis of governance, inequality, and public trust.

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**Sum Pichkanika** is a Junior Researcher at Center for Southeast Asian Studies of the Institute for International Studies and Public Policy, Royal University of Phnom Penh.

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